



Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications and Older Adults

Many of us hear our older relatives talk about all the pills they have to take. We rarely think about it. But nearly 20 percent of older persons are addicted to various substances, such as alcohol and prescription drugs.¹ Many others misuse medications, leading to harmful drug interactions and alcohol-drug interactions.

Medications of concern in older adults include those used to treat anxiety, depression, insomnia, and other mood disorders. Older adults also use over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements. These include pain relievers and ginkgo biloba to improve memory.

Taking multiple medications and herbal supplements can lead to serious side effects and drug interactions. Therefore, it is important to ensure that older persons use their medicines properly. Identifying, preventing, and treating this problem early can prevent injuries, loss of independence, hospitalization, and death.

Side Effects of Some Medications

Side effects of psychoactive drugs include the following:

- Excessive daytime drowsiness
- Loss of coordination, leading to falls and other problems
- Depression
- Delirium
- Insomnia
- Urinary problems
- Weakness
- Loss of appetite
- Constipation

- Withdrawal seizures

Few older persons have problems with prescription pain relievers. However, pain relievers can present problems if mixed with alcohol or other medications.

Drug and Alcohol Interactions

Drug and alcohol interactions are of increased importance in older adults. Even social drinking can be a problem for someone taking medicine regularly. In addition, drugs stay in the body longer in older adults. Therefore, interactions are likely to be worse.

Examples of dangerous drug-alcohol interactions:

- Acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) may cause liver damage in people having more than three drinks a day.
- Alcohol can worsen central nervous system depression in persons taking antidepressants such as Prozac, Elavil, and Wellbutrin.
- High doses of sedatives (such as Valium) mixed with alcohol can be lethal.

Drug Interactions

Most older adults take at least one prescription drug. Some take as many as eight drugs daily. Thus, they have a higher risk of drug interactions.

Harmful drug combinations can produce side effects such as fatigue, excessive sedation, coma, and death. Usually, however, the effects are mild. They include a change in sleep, appetite, or anxiety level. It is important to report side effects to a physician so that the dose can be adjusted. In some cases, a different medication might be needed.

Risk Factors for Medication Misuse

Few older adults use mood-altering drugs recreationally. Most problems stem from unintentional misuse. Misuse can take many forms, including the following:

- Taking extra doses
- Missing doses
- Not following instructions

- Using drugs that have expired
- Not knowing about side effects
- Sharing or borrowing drugs
- Intentionally misusing drugs to hurt oneself
- Taking the wrong drugs
- Mixing medications or drinking alcohol while taking medications
- Going to multiple physicians to get more of the same drug, such as Valium, which can lead to abuse and addiction

Risk of drug misuse among older persons increases for many reasons:

- Multiple physicians prescribing multiple drugs
- Inappropriate prescribing, especially for women (e.g., prescribing the wrong medication or an inappropriate dose)
- Instructions and package inserts written in small print or confusing language
- Failure to tell the doctor about over-the-counter medications, megadose vitamins, and herbals
- Memory problems making it difficult to keep track of medication schedules
- Problems taking medicine correctly because of alcohol use, depression, or self-neglect
- Missing instructions as a result of hearing or vision problems, memory problems, language barriers, and so forth

Warning Signs of a Drug Problem

Warning signs of a drug problem include the following:

- Excessively worrying about whether mood-altering drugs are “really working”
- Worrying about having enough pills or whether it is time to take them
- Complaining about doctors who refuse to write prescriptions for preferred drugs
- Self-medicating by increasing doses of prescribed drugs that “aren’t helping anymore” or supplementing prescribed drugs with over-the-counter drugs
- Withdrawing from family, friends, neighbors, and lifelong social practices
- Sleeping during the day and other sleep disturbances
- Unexplained injuries and changes in personal grooming and hygiene
- Expulsion from housing

Ways To Avoid Medication Misuse

It is possible to avoid medication misuse in many ways, including

- Improving medication adherence by consumers, including helping them read package inserts and understand instructions
- Encouraging health care professionals to explain carefully how and when medications must be taken and what must be avoided with prescriptions
- Improving doctor-patient communication; encouraging patients to share concerns and ask questions about their medication
- Encouraging consumers to inform health care providers and pharmacists of all medications they take regularly
- Addressing communication barriers such as hearing impairments, vision problems, low literacy, and language barriers
- Providing consumer aids, such as medication tracking charts and personal drug records
- Implementing policy changes, such as providing geriatrics-relevant labeling information

For more information, contact the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 800-729-6686 or www.health.org, or visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Web site at www.samhsa.gov. Also check Prevention Pathways, available through the SAMHSA site.

Reference

1. "Survey: 17 Percent of Older Americans Are Addicted." (1998). CNN Interactive, May 8.